



National Preparedness System: What Are We Planning For?

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am John M. Buckman III, Chief of the German Township (IN) Fire Department. I appear today on behalf of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), in my role as a past president of that organization. I am also a member of the State, Tribal and Local Working Group for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) involved in reviewing the development of several of the documents that comprise the new national preparedness system.

The IAFC represents the leaders and managers of America's fire and emergency service. America's fire and emergency service reaches every community across the nation, protecting urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods. Nearly 1.1 million men and women serve in more than 30,000 career, volunteer, and combination fire departments across the United States and respond to 22 million calls each year. The fire service is the only entity that is locally situated, staffed, and equipped to respond to all types of emergencies. Members of the fire service respond to natural disasters such as earthquakes, tornadoes, and floods as well as to man-made catastrophes, both accidental and deliberate, such as hazardous materials incidents and acts of terrorism. As such, America's fire service is an all-risk, all-hazard response entity.

The National Preparedness System

On December 17, 2003, the president issued Homeland Security Presidential Directive 8 (HSPD-8) to strengthen the preparedness of the United States by creating a national domestic all-hazards preparedness goal for facilitating cooperation among all levels of government. This document represents the first time that the federal government has attempted to establish a truly comprehensive, all-hazards national preparedness system. These documents represent the start of a necessary change in attitude on the part of federal, state, tribal and local governments that require us to examine our ability to prepare for, prevent and respond to disasters across all spectrums.

The national preparedness system is composed of six basic documents. The first, the National Preparedness Goal (NPG), sets a national vision for the preparedness system and establishes readiness priorities, targets, and metrics. The second set of documents is the National Planning Scenarios, a set of fifteen plausible scenarios describing terrorist attacks and natural disasters, which identify a broad range of prevention and response requirements. The third document, the Universal Task List (UTL), is derived from the scenarios, and provides the specific tasks that federal and non-federal agencies may have to perform in an emergency. The Target Capabilities List (TCL) is the fourth document, which identifies 36 areas that federal, state, local, and tribal entities will be expected to develop and maintain. The fifth and sixth documents were developed at the direction of HSPD-5, which was signed on February 28, 2003. The National Response Plan (NRP) establishes an all-discipline, all-hazards, single, comprehensive framework for federal, state, tribal, and local entities to use in managing a response to a domestic incident. The final document, the National Incident Management System (NIMS), establishes standardized operating procedures, protocols, and processes that federal, state, tribal, and local responders will use to coordinate and conduct response actions. Of these documents, the NRP and NIMS have been released, as has the Interim National Preparedness Goal, executive summaries of the National Planning Scenarios, and drafts of the TCL and UTL.

The IAFC is generally supportive of the national preparedness system that has at its core a new partnership between all levels of government and the private sector. DHS solicited our participation in developing these documents. I have represented the IAFC in that process. I would like to commend the DHS staff for diligently working to address the concerns of first responders. I also would like to recognize my fellow members of the public safety community,

who took the time to participate in this effort. It is extremely important that actual emergency response practitioners participate in this process in order to develop a workable national preparedness system that will ensure the safety of the American people.

General Comments upon the National Preparedness System.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to share some general thoughts with you about the national preparedness system before addressing specific concerns.

One of the most critical aspects of the national preparedness system is that it focuses on an all-hazards response approach. While the fire service responded to acts of terror against the World Trade Center in 1993, Oklahoma City in 1995, and the horrendous events of September 11, 2001, we also responded to numerous major accidents and natural disasters in the intervening years. Just last year, four hurricanes ripped through the state of Florida taxing the resources of that state and its neighbors. To be truly effective, the national preparedness system must be designed to respond to all of these events, not just an act of terrorism.

The national preparedness system also represents a major shift in philosophy. The system includes roles and responsibilities for all levels of government – federal, state, tribal, local, and even private stakeholders. State, tribal, and local governments have to recognize that they are part of a larger system, and that a single agency cannot handle major national incidents by themselves. Federal agencies must also recognize the need to not only work with each other, but also with their state, tribal and local partners. All of the stakeholders in the national preparedness system must embrace their new roles and responsibilities in order to make this system truly effective. The IAFC supports the focus on a truly national plan that is inclusive of all stakeholders.

Specific Priorities in NPG

In general, the IAFC supports the priorities listed in the Interim National Preparedness Goal. I would like to highlight four of them as being issues of particular importance to the fire service.

We support the “overarching priority” of implementing the NIMS and NRP. The NIMS will provide a consistent template for federal, state, tribal, and local entities to work together in responding to a disaster. The fire service was a leader in establishing the Incident Command System, which serves as a model for the NIMS. We have been using this system for decades, and we believe that it is important for law enforcement and other public safety entities to adopt this system. Similarly, the NRP provides a framework for federal, state, tribal, and local agencies to work together to respond to a crisis. The uniform nationwide adoption of these documents will prevent confusion during a crisis, when coordination is paramount.

We also support the “overarching priority” of expanding regional collaboration. The IAFC is a leader in calling for the use of mutual aid agreements and assistance compacts. It is only by working together through formal agreements that local jurisdictions can be prepared for any incident. No single fire department can afford all of the equipment that it will need to respond to large incidents and disasters, nor should every department be subjected to a “one size fits all” model. Mutual aid agreements are necessary for local jurisdictions to know who has what response capabilities and how the forces will respond to actual incidents. In addition, these agreements promote training across jurisdictions to better prepare for a future disaster.

The IAFC also supports the “capability-specific” priority of strengthening information sharing

and collaboration capabilities. I would like to emphasize that the federal government must share intelligence with the fire service, as well as law enforcement. In the event of a terrorist attack, the fire service likely will arrive on the scene at the same time or earlier than the local law enforcement. We must know what we are dealing with. It would be even better to know what threats are out there ahead of time, so we can prepare for them. There is a need to develop a system to communicate instantly with the fire chief in times of threat or increased risk to our community. The IAFC can play a role in helping to design an information-sharing system that gets the right information to fire chiefs in a manner that safeguards security.

Finally, the IAFC strongly supports the “capability-specific” priority of strengthening interoperable communications capabilities. The lack of interoperable communications is one of the greatest threats to public safety. At both Oklahoma City and the Pentagon, the incident commanders had to use human runners to communicate. The 9/11 Commission’s report details how the lack of interoperable communications proved fatal for 343 firefighters in the World Trade Center Towers. I would like to urge the members of this committee to support funding for the DHS’s SAFECOM program, and legislation to set a date certain for clearing the 700 MHz spectrum for public safety use.

Challenges to the National Preparedness System

The IAFC supports the new national preparedness system. However, I would like to raise a few issues about the system for the committee’s consideration.

For the new national preparedness system to be implemented, the federal government will have to provide tools such as matrices, decision making models and checklists. Not every community is as sophisticated as National Capital Region, New York or Los Angeles. The federal government must provide guidance on how smaller communities can adapt to the new system. In order for the national preparedness system to work, it must be implemented effectively everywhere.

Also, an all-hazards approach must be used to implement the national preparedness system. Of the 15 National Planning Scenarios, only two (major earthquake and major hurricane) are natural disasters. In the cases where scenarios could be either caused by terrorism or by accident, they are being presented as acts of terrorism, which limits their effectiveness. The limitation of natural disasters as a National Planning Scenario will impact planning and training funding in the future. Ideally, the planning scenarios would examine the effects of tornadoes, wildfires, and major floods in determining the UTL and TCL. If the HSPD-8 process is biased too heavily toward terrorism response, it runs the risk of being inadequate for dealing with more frequent natural disasters. The state, tribal, and local jurisdictions will not adopt a system that does not meet their needs, and the whole HSPD-8 process would become simply an academic exercise.

DHS must continue to solicit feedback from the fire service, law enforcement and other first responders. DHS is currently in the process of rolling out a system that will need to be constantly reviewed and revised. The national preparedness system cannot be a top-down system, where bureaucrats in Washington determine the policy. Local first responders must continue to be involved as these documents are revised. In addition, the IAFC believes that fire chiefs and other senior fire officials should be appointed to positions within the office of the Secretary of Homeland Security and in key positions throughout the department. The fire service must be represented at these levels to ensure that the HSPD-8 documents can be easily understood by the firefighter in the field.

The IAFC also would encourage the Office of State and Local Government Coordination and

Preparedness to consult with other agencies in the department as it implements the national preparedness system. The United States Fire Administration (USFA) should be deeply engaged in this process. Unfortunately, it is not. Last year, Congress tasked USFA with completing a needs assessment for the fire service as part of the reauthorization of the Assistance to Firefighters (FIRE) Grant program. The TCL should incorporate the findings of this needs assessment and other fire service data that USFA regularly collects. In addition, USFA runs the National Fire Academy, which is the premier national institution for training fire service leadership. USFA will play a major role in training the fire service in the NIMS and NRP, and it should be included in the implementation of the national preparedness system.

Finally, the IAFC believes that mitigation strategies must be addressed as part of the national preparedness system. Many basic mitigation strategies, such as hardening buildings to prevent damage from terrorist attack, earthquake or windstorm, will play a critical role in protecting the public from harm in the event of a disaster. The federal government has a number of programs, including the USFA's fire prevention programs and the National Earthquake Hazard Reduction Program, which engage in mitigation activities. These activities must be incorporated into the national preparedness system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank you again for holding this hearing. The national preparedness system is in its formative stage, and will require congressional and public support to become a reality.

I am happy to answer any of your questions.